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Mark Twain

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Library Notes

A Song Composed in a Dream

Mark Twain

In our dreams we have all made what seemed at the time to be surprisingly good jokes, & upon waking have remembered them long enough to examine them & be disappointed. Nine in ten of them were without point or humor, & the tenth was not up to our daylight best. Our dream-tales have seldom been as good at breakfast as they were in the dream; the same has been the case with our dream-orations & banquet impromptus & our dream-poems. They have almost always had one very prominent defect: the disposition to wander from the subject. In the case of a tale, the wanderings were likely to begin as early as the middle of it & go on wandering around & missing trains from that point to the end; and in the case of a poem, it might start with a definite thought but all the chances were against its sticking to it through six lines.

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I have dreamed in verse with a strange frequency, considering that I am a person who does not meddle with verse at all in the daytime. With exactly the same frequency I have found upon waking up and examining, that if in disregard of custom the dream-verses began with a definite thought they always lost their grip upon it early & wandered off into a wide nowhere & fell over the edge. But at last the rule is broken: I have dreamed in verse which began with a definite idea & stuck to it. The prose part of the dream, too, was sane & orderly — as you will see. In my dream, I was in a great and sumptuous opera house: the floor & all the galleries & boxes were filled with finely dressed people. A stately man in evening dress came out on the vast & otherwise unoccupied stage & stood there awhile apparently musing. The faces & eyes of the audience gave him an almost adoring

welcome — by which sign I knew that he was of high renown & acceptance — but not a sound broke the pervading stillness; there was not a movement, not a whisper, not the rustle of a gown; the people sat in the profound hush and gazed in a rapt expectancy at the man. Then followed a surprise for me; for he presently burst out in a sudden & mighty & uplifting enthusiasm of song that seemed to fill the house with an almost visible splendor & glory, & my breath stood still & my heart stopped beating, so moving it was, so magnificent, & so astonishing in the unexpectedness of it. He carried this rich & wonderful baritone storm through in a grand triumphal progress to a thunderous close, then stopped & stood silent before the panting and excited audience with a hand uplifted & his head tilted sidewise & upward — stood so as much as a minute, perhaps two, with the look of one who has lost himself in a reverie & is not conscious of what he is doing; & again

the house sat tranced, with devouring and expectant eyes riveted upon him. And now he began to sing again — this time in a tenor voice, & in a minor key. It was soft & low, & infinitely sweet, exquisitely sweet, & heart-breakingly plaintive & pathetic. One could see by the faces that the people knew this song; that they loved it; & one's instinct said that it was what they had come to hear, & that the glorious tempest which had preceded it had its thought-out purpose; that it was a preparation, a lurid & gorgeous & rock-riving volcanic background for this tender & opaline twilight. The song was an imploring & pleading & beseeching supplication — that was apparent enough before I had noticed the words. I knew the tune, it was familiar to me, I recognized it as a favorite, but for the moment I could not place it. And no

wonder: it was *Die Wacht am Rhein!* It was that martial & tremendous musical cyclone doing duty in this sweet & moving & entrancing way as an invocation. It stirred the house to the depths, & me with it; & it seemed to me the the right & loveliest

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expression & employment of that great tune had never been found till now. When I began to notice the words I found that they framed an Invocation to Liberty. When I woke I was still in possession of the words, & they were rational, but they soon began to fade. But not so with the substance; that remained with me. It was clearly defined, & easily rememberable. By the time I was done wondering over the matter & ready to go to sleep again, the wording had suffered more or less damage & only the last two lines remained unimpaired in my memory. When I got up an hour later I still had those lines, & was able to patch the

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others together in a phrasing which was not far away from the original. Here is the result. You will perceive that there is an idea & a purpose in the simple verses, & that it is adhered to & not lost sight of:

O Liberty we worship thee
And prostrate lift our hands
Fast bound with cruel chains
 And pray "O make us free!
O dawn for us! O beam on us!
O pity us! O rescue us!
Thou friend of breaking hearts,
 O Liberty!
Shine on us in thy grace
 O sweet Liberty!"

When a chorus of robust Germans, properly inspired with patriotism & beer, sing *Die Wacht am Rhein*, they deliver the last two lines of that mighty song with a thunder-crash. But when the man in the dream sang his Invocation his voice began to recede into the distance, as it

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were, with the first of his last four lines, & to gradually diminish in volume & augment in imploring eloquence & unearthly sweetness & pathos to the end. By that time the vast concourse of people had reverently risen & were standing: standing

Prof. Howard L. Chesser
Richards or North
1894

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A Song Composed in a Dream.

• Two Dreams =

We have all made what seemed at the time to be ~~very~~ surprisingly good jokes, & upon waking have remembered them long enough to examine them & be disappointed. It is in them of them were without point or humor, & the tenth was not up to our daylight best. Our dream-tales have seldom been ~~as~~ as good at breakfast as they were in the dream; the same has been the case with our dream-orations & banquet-impromptus & our dream-poems. They have almost always had one very prominent defect: the disposition to wander from the subject. In the case of a tale, the wanderings were likely to begin as early as the middle of it & go on wandering round & missing trains.

~~and~~ ~~from that point to the end;~~
and in the case of a poem, it might start with a definite thought but all the chances were against its sticking to it through six lines.

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motionless, with heads bent forward, tensely listening; they still stood in that impressive attitude one or two minutes after the last faint sound had expired — then vanished, like a light blown out!

NOTES

The manuscript of this Mark Twain sketch, now in the W. Hugh Peal Collection, University of Kentucky Libraries, has been described earlier in these pages by James D. Birchfield (*Kentucky Review* 4, no. 1 [1982], 219–20). Its existence confirms Samuel L. Clemens's authorship of the piece, which appeared anonymously, under the same title and without change (except for the alteration of ampersands to "and"), in The Contributors' Club of the *Atlantic Monthly* 101 (January 1903), 141–43. (The editor was alerted to the facts of original publication by Robert H. Hirst, General Editor, Mark Twain Project, University of California, Berkeley.)

Clemens's authorship of "A Song Composed in a Dream" was skillfully deduced by George Monteiro (*Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 71 [1977], 512–14) on the basis of an exchange of letters between Clemens and Bliss Perry, then editor of the *Atlantic*, pointing to the January 1903 issue, and to the "Song" as the most likely of the four "Clubs" in that number to have come from Twain's hand. The letters are preserved at the Houghton Library, Harvard University; Perry's are part of the Houghton Mifflin Company's letterbooks.

Clemens's preoccupation with dreams during the final fifteen years of his life, after the death of his daughter Susy in 1896, has been widely studied. (See, for instance, Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966], 340–48.) As a dreamer, "never quite sane in the night," he discovered a rich lode of irrational, unconscious material which he tried to order into meaningful shape as story and anecdote. This sketch, however, records a dream which, instead of falling "over the edge," as he puts it, is quite "sane and orderly." Undoubtedly referring to this piece in the letter of 14 October [1902] cited by George Monteiro, Clemens describes the dream as "quite true, & not yet two days old."

The good-humored Germanophilia that Clemens acquired from his travels and residence in Germany and Austria is in evidence in the sketch, particularly in the dream performer's use of "Die Wacht am Rhein," a stirring patriotic hymn dating from 1854, as the melody for the "Invocation to Liberty." (The anthem was part of Clemens's piano repertoire.) And his long association with the platform as a lecturer is obviously related to the dream's manifest content — a moment of triumph on the stage.

We reproduce here the first page of the seven-page holograph of the "Song," which bears in the upper left margin an inscription calling for "Proof to Samuel L. Clemens/Riverdale on the Hudson/New York." (The Clemenses lived there from October 1901 to June 1903.) This and the other

manuscript additions — "C Club Indent," "Jan/to office," and "R. R. Nov. 24. a.m." — are most likely by *Atlantic* editors and typesetters.

In the aforementioned letter to Bliss Perry, Clemens writes of his sketch, "If it is worth hiding away in the curtained Contributors' Club, do it. I can't sign it, as I am a Harper 'exclusive.'" For most of its history The Contributors' Club of the *Atlantic* allowed authors the benefit of anonymity for "essays in little" on a wide range of concerns. A study of and index to the Club is provided by Philip B. Eppard and George Monteiro's *A Guide to the Atlantic Monthly Contributors' Club* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983). In addition to the "Song," Eppard and Monteiro attribute five other Clubs to Clemens, including one in the first appearance of the feature in 1877.

— Brad Grissom

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